




Department of
Human Resources
POLICY

Approved by: Rebecca R. Hunter, Commissioner	Policy Number: 17-001
Signature: 	Supersedes: NA
Application: Executive Branch Agencies, All Employees	Effective Date: March 15, 2017
Authority: T.C.A. § 4-3-1703, T.C.A. § 8-30-104, T.C.A. § 50-1-501 et seq.	Rule: NA

Subject:

Abusive Conduct in the Workplace¹

The State of Tennessee is firmly committed to providing an environment in which all employees, applicants for employment, and members of the public are treated with professionalism and respect. It is the policy of the State of Tennessee to provide a work environment free from abusive conduct. The State of Tennessee will not tolerate any behavior in the workplace that is abusive or disrupts the work environment.

Employees are expected to exhibit proper behavior and conduct themselves in a manner that demonstrates professionalism and respect for others in the workplace. No employee shall engage in threatening, violent, intimidating, or other abusive conduct or behaviors.

This policy does not address behaviors that involve one of the protected classes listed under state and/or federal law. Allegations of abusive conduct involving the protected classes are addressed in the Workplace Discrimination and Harassment Policy (DOHR Policy #12-008).²

¹ While the State of Tennessee is committed to the principles embodied in this policy, this policy itself is not intended to state contractual terms between the State and its employees, applicants for employment, or parties who do business with the State. This policy supersedes all policies that conflict with the terms of this policy.

Furthermore, this statement constitutes ONLY the policy of the State of Tennessee. A finding violation of this policy does not mean that conduct violates state and/or federal laws.

² The protected classes defined by DOHR Policy (12-008) include race, color, national origin, age (40 and over), sex, pregnancy, religion, creed, disability, veteran's status, or any other category protected by state and/or federal civil rights laws.

Definition and Examples of Abusive Conduct in the Workplace

Abusive conduct means acts or omissions that would cause a reasonable person, based on the severity, nature, and frequency of the conduct, to believe that an employee was subject to an abusive work environment, such as:

- (a) Repeated verbal abuse in the workplace, including derogatory remarks, insults, and epithets;
- (b) Verbal, nonverbal, or physical conduct of a threatening, intimidating, or humiliating nature in the workplace; or
- (c) The sabotage or undermining of an employee's work performance in the workplace.

This policy applies to the use of the State of Tennessee email system, social media, computers, internet access, or any other State electronic communication systems or devices to engage in abusive conduct.

A single act generally will not constitute abusive conduct, unless such conduct is determined to be severe or pervasive. To aid employees in identifying abusive conduct, the following specific examples are provided. These examples are not exhaustive; they illustrate, however, the types of conduct that may violate this policy:

- Intimidating an employee by excessive yelling, repeated emotional outbursts, berating others, using an unreasonably harsh tone of voice;
- Undermining another's work by withholding pertinent work-related information or purposefully giving incorrect information, or by not giving enough information to do what is required, as compared to others;
- Arbitrary or punitive punishment without cause;
- Unreasonable micro-managing;
- Persistent or constant criticism in front of others for the purpose of humiliating another employee;
- Isolating an employee from co-workers, or launching a campaign not based on facts to provoke an employee to leave or be removed;
- Making humiliating or degrading remarks about a person through or on social media; or
- Any malicious behavior a reasonable person would find unprofessional, disturbing, and/or harmful to his or her psychological health.

Please note that this policy does not prohibit reasonable oversight of employees, performance reviews, coaching, requests, or other regular supervisory responsibilities. In addition, abusive conduct must be distinguished from behavior(s), which, even though harsh, unpleasant, or disconcerting, may be appropriate and necessary in the carrying out of certain instructional, operational, advisory, or supervisory responsibilities or activities authorized by quasi-military or correctional entities, or for law enforcement purposes.

How to Report Incidents of Abusive Conduct

If an employee believes he or she has been subjected to abusive conduct that violates this policy, he or she must report those incidents as soon as practicable after the event occurs.

Employees may file a complaint with their supervisor(s), department/agency head, any individual designated by the agency to receive such reports, or the Department of Human Resources. Under no circumstances is the individual alleging conduct that may violate this policy required to file a complaint with the individual who subjected him or her to the abusive conduct. Reports of abusive conduct can be made to the Department of Human Resources at Workplace.Harassment@tn.gov or (615) 741-4841.

Individuals who wish to file a complaint are encouraged, but are not required, to submit the complaint in writing and to include a description of the incident(s) as well as the date(s), time(s), and any potential witnesses.

Retaliation and How to Report Retaliation Incidents

Retaliation is defined as any activity that may dissuade a reasonable person from exercising his or her rights under this policy. This policy prohibits retaliation against employees who initiate a complaint under this policy, report an incident that may violate this policy, participate in an investigation related to a complaint under this policy, or are associated or perceived to be associated with a person who initiates a complaint or participates in the investigation of a complaint under this policy.

If an employee believes that he or she has been subjected to retaliation for engaging in protected conduct under this policy, he or she must report those incidents as soon as practicable after the event occurs. Incidents of retaliation should be reported in the same manner as a complaint for abusive conduct. Any employee who engages in retaliatory action will be subject to appropriate discipline, up to and including dismissal.

How Complaints are Investigated and Resolved

It is the State's policy to promptly investigate allegations of abusive conduct in the workplace as defined by this policy. The affected department will conduct a thorough and neutral investigation of all reported complaints of abusive conduct or retaliation as soon as practicable. If a complaint involves an executive director, commissioner, deputy commissioner, assistant commissioner, or equivalent, the Department of Human Resources Office of General Counsel will investigate the complaint on behalf of the department and report the results to the appropriate agency or authority.

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Generally, an investigation will include an interview with the complainant, the alleged offender, and any other witnesses who have direct knowledge of the circumstances of the allegations.

Once the investigation is complete, an investigative summary will be provided to the appointing authority for appropriate handling. All named parties will be informed of the investigation's outcome.

How Confidentiality is Treated

To the extent permitted by law, the State will try to maintain the confidentiality of each party involved in an investigation, complaint, or allegation of a violation of abusive conduct, provided it does not interfere with the department's ability to investigate the allegations or to take corrective action. However, state law may prevent the State from maintaining confidentiality of investigations. Therefore, the State does not guarantee confidentiality.

Directive to Supervisory Personnel

Supervisory personnel are responsible for ensuring appropriate behaviors are exhibited at all times and that complaints are reported to the appropriate personnel as soon as possible after receiving notice of incidents of abusive conduct.

Mandatory Cooperation

All employees must cooperate and/or provide documentary evidence, if applicable, with any investigation alleging abusive conduct in the workplace. Any employee who fails to cooperate and/or attempts to undermine and/or discourage participation in an investigation will be subject to discipline, up to and including dismissal.

Corrective Action for Violation of this Policy

Any employee who engages in conduct that violates this policy, or who encourages such conduct by others may be subject to corrective action. Such corrective action may include, but is not limited to, mandatory participation in counseling, training, disciplinary action up to and including termination, and/or changes in job duties or location.

Supervisory personnel who allow abusive conduct to continue or fail to take appropriate action upon learning of such conduct may also be subject to corrective action. Such corrective action may include, but is not limited to, mandatory participation in counseling, training, or disciplinary action up to and including termination, or changes in job duties or location.

Questions regarding this policy may be directed to the Office of the General Counsel.